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ABSTRACT

This speech reviews school effectiveness research over the past 5 years, presenting the most important conclusions: schools make a difference in how much children learn, and principals make a difference in school effectiveness. The characteristics of better schools listed are: 1) clear sense of purpose, (2) well-formulated instructional goals, (3) orderly environment, (4) a team approach with shared objectives, (5) high pupil expectations, and (6) effective instructional leadership. It is emphasized that effective schools have effective principals. In identifying these characteristics, Michael Cohen of the National Institute of Education is quoted extensively. The author delineates additional skills and knowledge that principals need but that are not taught in education classes. He recommends that effective principals must, first, understand school effectiveness research; second, be able to evaluate and improve instructional programs; third, have a knowledge of organizational behavior; and fourth, understand the nature and theory of leadership. The author additionally points to skills in supervising, evaluating and giving feedback to teachers, effectively communicating, using incentives and rewards, and viewing the school as a continuing cycle of diagnosis and assessment. It is concluded that the school is a dynamic institution that changes and grows, and effective principals determine that growth potential. (MD)

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"A Principal's Leadership in Developing the Characteristics of Excellent Schools"

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(Prepared for delivery at the 80th Annual Convention of the National Catholic Education Association, Elementary Department. Shoreham Hotel, Washington, D.C., April 6, 1983)

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There has, as you know, been an impressive amount of serious research into what is termed "school effectiveness" in the past five years, and while that research has certain limitations that plague us as we try to derive its implications for educational policy and practice, several conclusions seem solidly-supported and worth citing.

I'm going to mention just two of them, and am going to state them in over-simplified language:

First, schools make a difference in how much children learn.

Second, principals make a difference in how effective schools are.

That it is even necessary to utter these conclusions--for that matter, to have done the research that generated them--in 1983 is itself remarkable, for each seems perfectly consistent with generations of common sense and conventional wisdom in the education profession and in the society generally. And of course that is so.

But we have also had more than a decade of education research, analysis and social criticism that seemed to be saying that schools don't make a difference. And that the differences between schools don't make a difference either.

We do not have time today for a complete tour through all the research and interpretation that commenced with James Coleman's celebrated 1966 Report on Equality of Educational Opportunity, and I'm not fully qualified to lead such a tour, anyway. The essential point is that it turned out that schools were--and are--relatively less powerful social agencies than we had hoped when it comes to such matters as equalizing differences in social class, in economic status, etc. The part of the poverty program that relied on increased education to end poverty was unrealistically optimistic about the power of schooling.

A related point is that schools turned out to be more alike than they were different with regard to most physical facilities, resources, and other tangible

ingredients. So it was not surprising that the very modest differences that were found in such variables had relatively little effect on how much students learned. (But it is important to remember that the mid-sixties were a time when a lot of people, including most educators, believed fervently that there was some sort of direct linkage between a school's resources and its effectiveness. This, as we now know, is quite wrong, at least above a certain minimum resource level where you begin to have something that is reasonably called a school.)

But as my mentor and friend, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, observed in the course of reanalyzing the Coleman data, it's absurd to say that schools don't make a difference. Very few people learn algebra on their own. Schools may not end poverty or make up for disorganized families and crime-ridden neighborhoods, but they are the major source of the cognitive skills and knowledge that a child acquires. They make a very considerable difference indeed in the domain where they do most of their work.

And yet they aren't all equally good at it. Which is to say, some schools are more effective than others in raising student achievement (or however you want to measure school effectiveness, but if you want to talk to me you'll have to talk primarily about cognitive growth and development.) This turned out to be true even when researchers controlled for factors such as socio-economic status. In other words, it wasn't just different kinds of kids that led to measurable differences in school effectiveness. It was something--it <u>is</u> something--having directly to do with the schools themselves.

This prompted a whole body of inquiry that we now generally refer to as "school effectiveness research". It's quite recent. It turns out to be quite commonsensical. Though nearly all of it was done in public schools, I am confident that its essential findings pertain at least as well to private schools (and some of the NCEA-sponsored research now underway will pretty well settle

any doubts on that score, I predict.)

What the school effectiveness research appears to show is, as I say, commonsensical. I suspect you're familiar with it, as summary statements have appeared in virtually all the education journals. Looking both at events within the classroom and events within the school as a whole, the school effectiveness research findings attempt to describe the characteristics of those educational environments that appear most conducive to higher pupil achievement. At the school level, which is what I am dwelling upon today, those characteristics turn out to include a clear sense of purpose, well-formulated instructional goals, an orderly environment (i.e. good, though not necessarily rigid, discipline), a school staff that regards itself as a team and works accordingly in the pursuit of shared objectives, high pupil expectations and, perhaps above all--and the point I want to emphasize this afternoon--effective instructional leadership. That, in nearly every case, means that an effective school has an effective principal, and that, in turn, does not mean a principal who is content to keep the corridors clean and the schedule tidy and the budget balanced and the parents mollified and the books bought and the students disciplined. No. Those are good and necessary, but they are not enough. When the principal is an instructional leader he (or she) is something quite additional to being an efficient building manager.

Let me not put it into my own words, but rather quote at some length from a fine recent synthesis by Michael Cohen of the National Institute of Education, who is one of our most knowledgeable interpreters of research on school effectiveness:

"What," Cohen asks, "do we know about what effective principals do? First, the goal orientation of principals appears to be especially important. Effective principals tend to emphasize achievement by setting instructional goals,

developing performance standards for students, and expressing optimism about the ability of students to meet instructional goals. Not surprisingly, in light of the inherent constraints of the role, effective principals need to be proactive, and develop and articulate a vision of the school and where it is going, and keep that vision in mind in the course of their numerous daily interactions.

"Several personal characteristics appear to be particularly important as a consequence of the role characteristics. ...Effective principals require the ability to work closely with others; the ability to manage conflict; an ability to deal with ambiguity and with competing and often conflicting demands; a good deal of personal resourcefulness; and the ability to see and utilize opportunities for discretion in the formulation and implementation of action plans for their school.

"There is also some accumulating evidence regarding the activities of effective principals in the organization and management of the instructional program. For example, compared with their less effective counterparts, effective principals tend to take responsibility for instruction. They observe teachers regularly and discuss their work problems. They are supportive of teachers' efforts to improve by providing appropriate staff development activities, as well as assistance and feedback to teachers trying new instructional approaches.

"....Another view of what effective principals do stresses the importance of buffering classroom teaching from a variety of disruptions. The notion here is that principals can promote effective teaching by creating the conditions which enable it to occur, and preventing or limiting intrusions once it is underway. So, for example, it becomes important for principals to see to it that supplies and materials are available when needed, and that interruptions into classroom instructional time ...are minimized. Additionally, the principal can support classroom teaching by establishing school-wide discipline policies,

and supporting teachers dealing with discipline problems...."

That's all Cohen says about principals, per se, but I'm going to subject you to another dose of his very fine paper, for it has to do with the culture of the school as a whole, and it is evident to me that the principal is a key figure in creating and preserving that culture. Here, as in most other respects, the principal cannot do much singlehandedly. But how many of you have seen a good school with a lousy principal? Here, then, is Cohen on what he terms "Shared values and culture", and I think you'll find this particularly germane to Catholic schools:

"A number of studies and analyses...suggest that effective schools generate a strong sense of community, with commonly shared goals and high expectations for student and staff performance, and with mechanisms for sustaining common motivation, commitment and identification with school goals on the part of staff and students.

"The norms and values which characterize the school community, and which unite individual members of the organization into a more cohesive identity, pertain both to the academic function of the school, as well as to the nature of the day-to-day interactions and social relations among staff and students....Thus, positive expectations for student performance...serve to communicate the primacy of the instructional mission of the school, and the obligation of both teachers and students to participate in it. However,...community in schools is dependent upon more than shared instrumental goals. It requires the creation of a moral order, which entails respect for authority, genuine and pervasive caring about individuals, respect for their feelings and attitudes, mutual trust, and the consistent enforcement of norms which define and delimit acceptable behavior. Such a strong moral order serves to create an identity for the school, provides meaning to membership in it, and reduces alienation....

"The importance of a shared moral order should not be underestimated, for it can be traced to several fundamental properties of schools. Schools are fragile social institutions, easily disrupted by conflict in or around them....With weak controls and problematic compliance, the situation is further complicated by the fact that teaching and learning require not only compliance but commitment and engagement as well. Under such circumstances, the school cannot rely simply on coercive power to bring about order. Rather, schools are normative organizations which must rely on the internalization of goals, the legitimate use of authority, and the manipulation of symbols, as means of controlling and directing the behavior of participants."

I expect you have recognized either your own school or other Catholic schools known to you. I have no doubt whatsoever that one of the sources of the educational effectiveness of so many Catholic schools is the quality and strength of the moral order found within them.

But this detracts not a bit from the significance of the principal. Rather, I believe it underscores that significance. For once again, while I do not suggest that the principal can single-handedly create a moral order in an institution, I have practically never seen a school with a strong moral order that didn't have an effective principal at its helm.

How do principals do what they do? I sometimes find it remarkable that so many of them are good at it, for their work--your work--is so fragmented. Those who have observed principals as they go about their activities in the course of the school day, day after day, have been struck by one perception above all, namely that the principal's day is chopped up into literally hundreds of very brief events and encounters, most of them unplanned. That is, the principal responds or reacts or copes with dozens and dozens of specific situations that arise in the course of the day. He is a little bit like a short order cook in

a busy diner, who must rapidly produce whatever the customers order from an enormous menu of possible choices, and who has little or no control over how many customers there are, when they will arrive, or what they will feel like eating that day. (My friends will tell you that a great many of my metaphors and analogies have to do with food!)

How, in the midst of so many short and largely unplanned events, can the principal exercise instructional leadership? How can he create or help create a strong moral order? Here we begin to get near the differences between effective and ineffective principals. For even the chef in a diner can subtly influence the day's events in a number of ways. He can get a few things cooking with particularly appetizing aromas that will tend to encourage customers to order those things. He can whisper to the waitresses and waiters about what is good today and what they should encourage the customers to order. He can put up signs saying "today's special". He can build a reputation for a few dishes that he cooks better than practically everybody else. When something is ordered that he doesn't think should be cooked or that he knows he can't cook successfully --or even if he thinks it wouldn't be good for the customer--he can conveniently discover that he's just run out of the key ingredient. He can cook some things ahead of time in order to lessen the pressure on him at the lunch hour. He can rework the menu. Now he doesn't have full control, unless he also happens to be the restaurant owner--and even the owner can't make changes that will discourage all the customers from coming back--but the cook who wants to do more than react to the traffic thru his diner door can in all sorts of ways influence what goes on in his institution.

The same is true for principals. Some of them simply react. They cope. They are content if they make it through the day without catastrophe. A good day, to them, is one in which nothing exceptional happens, in which they are never caught off guard, in which they never lose their temper, in which no scrap

of paper remains for long on the corridor floor and no noise from children remains audible for long in the corridor either.

You have met such principals. I have met such principals. Some of them even have the reputation for being good principals. But they are not instructional leaders. And while they may have effective teachers in their schools and while a lot of learning may occur, it is not as good a school as it could be if the principal took an active and purposeful role in what is taught and how well it is taught and what the instructional goals are and how successfully they are achieved.

But outstanding principals, I submit to you, are seldom born that way. To be sure, an effective principal needs certain personal attributes--call them character, intellect, temperament or personality--that he must ordinarily be born with, or at least must acquire at an early age. These are hard to impart to an adult who does not already have them.

But the knowledge and skills of instructional leadership at the school level can be acquired. Indeed, I submit, they must be acquired, for they seldom come from heredity, and may I be forgiven for saying that I don't believe they're all God-given either.

Some of the skills and knowledge needed for effective instructional leadership is acquired in the course of being a good teacher, and it is the fact that nearly all principals were once teachers. But it is certainly not the case that every good teacher becomes an effective principal; indeed, you and I know of truly gifted teachers who would make mediocre principals. Conversely, there are a lot of very good principals who were not themselves particularly terrific as classroom teachers. This is a minor heresy in a meeting of educators, but I'm not even persuaded that an effective principal ever needs to have taught at all. (We have no research findings on this, so far as I know, since there really isn't any data on the matter, given that virtually all of today's principals in fact were teachers once upon a time.) But even if he hasn't taught, he

must, of course, know a great deal about education; about curriculum and pedagogy, to be sure; but also about the history and philosophy of education; about learning styles; and testing and measurement; and developmental psychology.

Those can all be learned, and typically they are learned--or at least taught--in our schools of education. But there are other bodies of knowledge and skills that effective principals of my acquaintance also have, and these are seldom taught in schools of education, though they too can be acquired.

Indeed, it is the gap between what is characteristically taught, even to administrators, in our schools of education, and the knowledge and skills required for effective instructional leadership--that gap which accounts for the emergence in recent years of so many principals' academies and institutes and special training programs. We have one of those principals' institutes at Vanderbilt University, and part of what I am saying here is derived from our very successful experience over an arduous four week program last summer and from our plans for the summer ahead.

What are these additional skills and knowledge that an effective principal needs and can acquire? Mind you, I have already stipulated that he has the essential personal traits, and that he knows a good deal about the nature and content of education.

Here is what else I think he needs.

First, he needs to understand the very kinds of school effectiveness research findings that I have been alluding to today, and he needs to understand them with considerably greater sophistication than I have used in talking about them this afternoon.

Second, he needs to understand how the curriculum is organized, and why it is organized that way, and how the learning objectives embodied in the curriculum are related to one another, and how the materials and techniques can be used to attain the learning objectives. And he needs to understand these things with

sufficient confidence to be able to evaluate the curriculum of his school and to devise improvements in it.

Third, he needs to know something about organizational behavior. The school is a fairly complex organization, and the principal is smack in the center of it, and if he doesn't understand some of the major theories about how organizations work and why they work that way he will be nearly helpless in performing his own necessary role.

Fourth, he must understand something about the nature and theory of leadership. You may think of leadership in sociological terms, in terms of social psychology, in political terms. I happen to think it is all of those and more. But it is not a mystery. It is merely complicated, and it is a subject that has been intensively studied by some very fine scholars over a very long period of time and that is at least reasonably well understood.

Now, the four things I have mentioned are all in the nature of knowledge that I believe an effective principal must have and can acquire. Indeed, I submit that most effective principals have at least a journeyman's grasp of those things, a practical understanding, though they may lack some of the theory.

Besides knowledge, though, the principal who is an effective instructional leader also possesses certain skills. We worked on these with some success in our principals' institute at Vanderbilt. Again I am going to mention four of them.

First, the principal must be very good at supervising teachers. That doesn't mean being the teacher's boss. It means being able to evaluate the classroom work of the teacher and to translate that evaluation into advice to the teacher as to how he or she can improve classroom performance. That includes spending a lot of time in classrooms, observing. But not sitting there like a Sphinx. If the classroom observation isn't merged with knowledge derived from other indicators, such as pupil achievement results, it isn't a complete basis

for evaluating the teacher's effectiveness; and if it isn't mediated by knowledge about the students themselves, it still isn't complete. But, above all, if the principal keeps it to himself, or writes it down in a file somewhere, or simply shares it with the superintendent, it doesn't lead to improved educational effectiveness in the school. No, what the principal must do is feed his perceptions back to the teacher in ways that the teacher can use to improve performance in the classroom. This is imperative. But far too often it isn't done. Either the principal doesn't feel confident about his abilities to evaluate teacher performance, or he doesn't like doing it, or he doesn't recognize the importance of translating his information into constructive feedback. I believe that the techniques of teacher evaluation, supervision and feedback are among the most important competencies of the effective principal. But they are often lacking.

Second, the principal must be able to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing. We found in our principals' institute that a great many principals lack confidence in their communications ability, and, unfortunately, that a lot of them were <u>right</u> to lack confidence, because they weren't very good at it. They did not write clearly or persuasively or logically or with understanding of how it would be understood by the reader. For example, we would ask them to write a memo, and they would simply issue an edict or jot down a rule or give an order, not realizing, in this case, that the recipients would be far more apt to understand and respect it if they were given background and reasons and explanations. Likewise, a lot of principals are not good at oral communication. That doesn't mean they are tongue-tied. To the contrary. Most principals talk a lot. But how many of them can give a coherent, orderly, logical, oral presentation? When we asked our principals in the institute to give a short talk, a great many came forth with a sort of stream-of-consciousness utterance that went from nowhere to anyplace without achieving any particular effect. The kind of mental

check-list that the effective speaker uses, silently ticking off one point after another in planned, logical sequence, working from premises through arguments and evidence to conclusions--that simply was missing from their oral presentations, both spontaneous and planned. I might add that once we pointed this out and suggested a few ways of going about it, the principals responded eagerly and successfully. It is easier to improve oral communications for most people than to improve written. Clear writing is not easy. But it, too, can be learned, and the effective principal needs to learn it.

Third, the effective principal knows how to use incentives and rewards (and, if necessary, sanctions and penalties) to achieve results. The teachers' unions, of course, resist this, but it is a fact of human nature that most people do better work if they are rewarded, and most forms of misbehavior can be curbed through appropriately designed penalties. Please do not get me wrong. I do not think of the principal as a person who walks around scolding teachers and smacking children, nor as one who gives boxes of candy to teachers and lollipops to students. Most incentives and rewards are more complicated and subtle than that. The most effective incentives and rewards are those that a person can consciously, purposely, work to achieve, not something that comes out of the blue.

Fourth, and last, the effective principal internalizes in himself the ability to view his school as an endless cycle of diagnosis and assessment, planning and implementation, evaluation and further diagnosis. The school, in this view, is not a static institution. It is a dynamic one, that can be changed provided one knows what changes it needs, provided one plans those changes in relation to the needs, provided one carries out the changes as planned, provided one evaluates the effects of the changes that are made, and provided that one uses each evaluation as a basis for diagnosing the current condition of the school in order to plan the next round of improvements.

This last skill is not easily learned, for it is quite complicated even to explain, and in practice it gets more complicated still, given that in any school a number of these cycles are going on, in various stages, at the same time. But if there is any single crucial distinction between the ordinary principal and the effective principal, it is the distinction between viewing the principal's task as a maintenance operation and viewing it as a series of well-formulated goals for improvement leading to plans and activities and evaluations and assessments and reflections and then to more goals, more plans, and more actions.

No one ever said it was easy to be a good principal. I never promised you a rose garden. (In truth, the rose garden isn't a bad image for the principalship. It requires intensive cultivation, patience, a little luck, the proper resources, some scientific understanding, a lot of hard work, some help from the elements, much planning, the ability to learn from experience and plan better next time. Also it has thorns. But they are sometimes associated with lovely blooms.)

It is not easy to be an effective principal in an effective school, but it is not impossible. Granted, no one person can do it without some of the external conditions being favorable. A miserable superintendent can undercut much of the work of even the best and hardest working principal. And yet, I have been struck by the number of mediocre, bureaucratized big city school systems that have within them at least a few extraordinarily schools, sometimes even in the meanest parts of town. And what nearly always sets those extraordinary schools apart from the others turns out to be their principals, who somehow overcome the constraints imposed from without to achieve, thru dint of extraordinary effort and will and energy and vision, an effective school, despite all the reasons why it shouldn't flourish there, a single marvelous rosebush among a lot of wilted plants.

The principal, in short, does make a difference. And the characteristics of an effective principal, I would like to repeat, can in the main be acquired, provided one starts with the personal traits that cause one to want to acquire them. They are not reliably acquired by being a teacher, and regrettably they are not reliably acquired by completing a graduate degree in school administration at the vast majority of the nation's schools of education. But they can be acquired, and we are learning ways in which this can be facilitated.

If schools didn't matter, principals wouldn't matter. If all schools were equally effective or ineffective, we wouldn't be having this conversation. But, to conclude where I began, we now know with some scientific confidence a lot of things that a lot of you have sensed for a long time. Schools matter. They make a difference. They are where children learn things that they need to know to become successful adults, citizens, people. Some schools do this better than others do. It is not a matter of luck or random assignment. Some schools are more effective because they have the characteristics of effective schools, among which there is none more important than the presence of a good principal. Thank you.